DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 450 434 CS 510 513

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TITLE Facilitating Classroom Discussion: Lessons from Student-Led Discussions.

PUB DATE 2000-11-00

NOTE 25p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Communication Association (86th, Seattle, WA, November 9-12, 2000).

PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.

DESCRIPTORS *Classroom Communication; *Classroom Techniques; Communication Research; Discourse Analysis; *Discussion (Teaching Technique); Higher Education; Student Participation

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Facilitating Classroom Discussion: Lessons From Student-Led Discussions

Presented at National Communication Association Conference
Instructional Development Division
November 2000, Seattle WA

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Abstract

What does it take to facilitate a good classroom discussion? This paper does not set out to give a definitive answer to this question. Rather it presents several excerpts from student-led discussions as examples of how students are able to facilitate class-long discussion on a controversial topic. This paper begins with a brief overview of the prescriptive literature focussing on a summary of the central concerns teachers have when leading a classroom discussion. This section is followed by a general description of the site in which the student-led discussions took place. Then, five moments from the actual discussions are analyzed to show the unfolding of these student-led discussions. These excerpts have been chosen to show how the students start the discussion, keep the discussion going, and end the discussion. Finally, some conclusions are drawn about the communicative actions that construct classroom discussions, and some comments are made about what this type of investigation has to add to the prescriptive literature on classroom discussions.

Facilitating Classroom Discussion: Lessons From Student-Led Discussions

In recent years, a significant amount of scholarly work has been done on the topic of discussion in the classroom. Much of this work has been prescriptive in nature. These prescriptions have arisen out of two types of scholarly work and their corresponding sources. One of these sources has been theoretical conceptions of what discussions should and/or could be. The second source has been the reflections of practicing teachers on the positives and negatives of their own experiences. While these two lines of work have produced practical suggestions on how to prepare for and lead particular kinds of discussions, what they have not produced is a detailed picture of what it is to interactively construct an unfolding classroom discussion. In order to begin to get such a picture, research needs to focus in a different direction.

One possible such direction is to apply a different research method to a specific type of classroom discussion. One approach to understanding the communicative construction of a classroom which has not received much attention is the close analysis of the discourse of the discussion. In this approach, the researcher examines closely the vocal and visible actions of both the facilitators and the discussants to notice how the interactants perform their respective roles and together construct the discourse. In terms of choosing a specific type of discussion to research, one type of discussion which occurs in higher education classrooms but has not received much attention in the research literature is student-led discussions. One interesting aspect of studying student-led discussions is that most likely the students will not be familiar with the prescriptive literature and will have received a minimum of training on the prescribed methods of how

to lead a discussion. In fact, most likely the most significant source of information the students will have on how to lead and participate in discussions is the class discussions in which they have previously participated. Therefore, through studying how students perform the roles of facilitator and participant an alternative perspective can be gained on how people go about and understand this endeavor of having a classroom discussion.

This paper is an attempt to provide insight into the communicative actions that construct classroom discussions through bringing together the prescriptive literature on how teachers should lead classroom discussions with an analysis of the discourse of the facilitators and participants in a student-led discussion. The argument of this paper is that while the literature sets out an ideal set of twin concerns for a discussion leader, in these student discussions the central concern appears to be slightly different, and the concern which is manifested in these student-led discussions is maintaining the participation structure.

This paper begins with a brief overview of the prescriptive literature focussing on a summary of the central concerns teachers have when leading a classroom discussion. This section is followed by a general description of the site in which the student-led discussions took place. Then, five moments from the actual discussions are analyzed to show the unfolding of these student-led discussions. Finally, some conclusions are drawn about the communicative actions that construct classroom discussions, and some comments are made about what this type of investigation has to add to the prescriptive literature on classroom discussions.

Prescriptive Literature Overview—Teacher Concerns

Teachers who lead discussion in the classroom have two primary concerns. The first has to do with the content of the discussion. As Christensen et al. (1991) note, discussion teaching "is essentially a systematic way of constructing a context for learning from the knowledge and experience of students, rather than exclusively from the canons of disciplinary knowledge" (xiv). One major concern of the teacher as discussion leader, then, is with the material being discussed – to make sure the discussion is meeting the educational goals of the class. The second concern relates to the process of the discussion. Dillon (1994) writes, "It is the students who discuss. Accordingly, the teacher's actions must be those that help the students to discuss" (59). The teacher is rarely an equal participant in the discussion, and has special responsibilities throughout the course of the discussion. It is the role of the teacher as discussion leader to help the students to discuss the question before them, and also to learn how to engage in discussion in general.

As a discussion leader, the teacher has a number of specific concerns, including getting it started, keeping it going, and making sure that content material is learned. Preparation actually begins long before the actual discussion starts, as the teacher must help the students become ready to engage in discussion, for example by using questions in lectures to help the students begin to reflect on and respond to the topics, or by encouraging students to read texts critically prior to the discussion so that they are ready to talk about the topics (Brookfield & Preskill, 1999). Before the class begins, the teacher must also read the assigned material, identify important concepts, and develop a plan (formal or informal) for the way the time in the class period should be spent. For

example, Welty (1989) suggests that teachers should prepare a detailed outline before the discussion which includes prepared questions, written out word for word, for important moments such as the beginning, transitions, and conclusion of the discussion. Shor (1996) and others describe how the furniture and seating arrangements in the classroom can also have a significant impact on the process of the actual discussion.

The teacher as discussion leader must be concerned with both the content and the process of the class, especially as it relates to beginning, maintaining, and ending the discussion. Welty (1989) recommends beginning the class period with informal conversation with the students (for example, giving them the opportunity to ask questions about the class or the assignments) before beginning the discussion, in order to ease the tension (for both teacher and students). Next would come a short introduction where the teacher might make some opening remarks about the topic and describe where the assignment fits with the class as a whole. Finally, the teacher raises the question to initiate discussion. This question is especially important in setting the tone for the remainder of the conversation. Christiensen suggests that these should be open but approachable questions, tailored to the needs and interests of both individual students and the whole group, to encourage the students to engage with the material.

Once the discussion has begun, the teacher must keep the discussion going through questioning, listening, and responding. Dillon (1994) recommends that teachers should not ask questions during a discussion, beyond raising the initial question for discussion, but instead should foster discussion processes by actively using non-questioning alternatives such as statements, signals, and silences. Other authors (including Brookfield & Preskill, 1999) suggest that teachers use a variety of questions,

such as those that ask for clarification or more evidence, those that link or extend previous statements, and those that are open-ended. The teacher must also be concerned with the content of the discussion, making sure that the necessary material is covered in the discussion, through concept development, clarification, verification, and analysis (Clarke, 1988). Technical material can also be managed through short summaries by the teacher or by management of tangents and out-of-place comments, keeping the focus of the discussion on the topic at hand (Christiensen, 1991). An additional concern of the teacher is with encouraging the participation of each student, for the eventual purpose of grading, especially in terms of creating the opportunity (or even requirement) of equal time for each student. Finally, the teacher must be concerned with how to end the discussion, generally by pulling aspects of the conversation together, summarizing the key points, and relating it to the rest of the course (Welty, 1989).

This overview points out that there are two major concerns the teacher has during a discussion: making sure the students "learn" the appropriate material and making sure the students are the ones doing the discussing. Further, this literature also points out three key phases of discussion leading: getting the discussion going, keeping the discussion going, and ending the discussion. The specific concerns set out by this literature are all related to being able to meet one of these more general concerns, and the suggested techniques are designed to assist with successful accomplishment of one of the three key phases.

Theoretically then, a teacher-led discussion would unfold by the teacher using many of the techniques mentioned above to keep the students talking and keep the discussion centered on relevant material and concepts. As mentioned earlier, student-led

discussions may vary significantly from teacher-led discussions. The role of teacher as facilitator may be quite different from the role of student as facilitator. While it may be a fairly straightforward translation from prescription to action for teachers, the translation might not be so smooth for students in the position of leading a discussion. Due to this indirect translation for student facilitators, an examination of student-led discussion may give some insight into the relationship between the prescriptions and the actuality of classroom discussions.

Description of the Site

The excerpts analyzed here are taken from a set of several student-led discussions which were video-taped in their entirety. All of the discussions took place in undergraduate upper-level critical thinking classes at a large state University in the American west. There were twenty-five students enrolled in the class. For each discussion, a group of five or six students were assigned to lead a discussion on a controversial topic. The group chose the topic and also chose the readings the rest of the class would do in preparation for the discussion. While the instructor may make a few procedural announcements at the outset of the class and is in the room during the discussion, s/he is not a participant in the discussion.

Analyzing the Data

These four excerpts show how the facilitators and the participants performed their respective roles and interactively constructed these classroom discussions. These excerpts were chosen because they represent the three key phases of classroom

discussion: opening, keeping the discussion going, and closing. An important note about the transcript notations in the excerpts: F is a female participant, M is a male participant, FF is a female facilitator, MF is a male facilitator.

Excerpt 1 is an example of the facilitators' setting up the discussion with their opening comments. This excerpt comes from a discussion on capital punishment.

Excerpt 1:

FF3: We just want to make sure that we're gonna have a safe and inclusive environment and as facilitators we'll make sure that no one's opinion is um downgraded for whatever they believe. So we're gonna go ahead and first start off with um a few questions that Courney has

FF1: Can you guys take out a piece paper [pause, classroom noise] You can just like even share we just want do a quick essay some questions.

The opening line of this discussion is striking in what is stated and what is left unstated. This opening line says nothing about the topic of the discussion, the learning objectives of the discussion, or contains any other academic language. What is contained in the opening line is a statement of what the facilitators see their role as being. They are not the there to "keep the conversation on track", or "to help everybody learn something new". Rather, they are there to make sure that there is a safe and inclusive environment and that no one's opinion is downgraded. The facilitators use the opening line as an opportunity to clarify what it is they are trying to accomplish in this discussion and what role their actions are intended to fulfill.

While a teacher may very well make a similar opening statement, it is interesting that the prescriptive literature does not point out that when leading a discussion the

teacher should make a clear statement as to what s/he sees his or her role as being. Rather, the teacher is advised to make sure the students see where the discussion fits in with the course as a whole in terms of material. The students (at least in this case) seem to be doing something slightly different than what has been prescribed.

Excerpt 2 is an example of a typical sequence of facilitator and participant interaction and occurs during the keeping the discussion going phase. This interaction occurs about fifteen minutes into or about one third of the way through this particular discussion. The topic of the discussion is the "glass ceiling".

Excerpt 2:

FF3: So do you value um more qualified people than equality or

F1: Yeah I think that the most qualified people should have the jobs because then I think they 're gonna do the best work I don't think that I mean whether its male or female I think females could be equally qualified (by) I don't think there's any biological limits to that but I think that if a male's more qualified ( ) he should get the job

[tapping or clicking]

FF2: Is there any beside the book there in the classroom here that on on qualifications merit over um

F2: Well I kinda actually I kinda agree with her .hhh the one point that I did agree with in the second article is when he was talking about um the woman doesn't have to be just as qualified as any man to get the job she has to be just as qualified as the top men the men who know their stuff who know what they're doing have those engineering degrees or whatever you know the men who can can do these jobs you have to compete with them you can't just be oh well I'm as good as this guy sitting next to me you have to be as good as the guy whose in that office right now (.) in order to achieve that status and a lot of women don't see that and that's where I think the the glass ceiling is getting thrown way out of proportion is people think oh well I'm just as good as this guy whose sitting next to me you know in this cubicle or whatever you know and (.) so they think oh I'm getting discriminated against because I didn't get promoted well you know you're not as good as the guy whose sitting at the desk right now and that's the problem

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F3: I think the big debate is (.) the equal pay issue I think that that's what a lot of women have a problem with is they're doing the same job as the men and getting paid less and I think that's (..) a bigger issue than the the th qualification thing because any company is gonna want the most qualified person at the top (.) like it doesn't matter if its a man or a woman I mean whoever's gonna be able to do the job should get the job but the woman who's at the top needs to be getting just as much as the man who's either sitting there next to her or (.) in another company I mean that's that's the bottom line

FF1: Take it back to the (clears throat) sorry the equality and what a woman would give up how many people in here feel that they could they would do that male or female give up family work the long hours how many people here think that they could actuall::y have the drive to make it all the way to the top to be a CEO or (.) president does anybody anybody feel that they'd make those sacrifices

F4: I I don't want children anyway so (lots of laughter)

FF1: do you think that a lot of the issue that there aren't a lot of women is because there just aren't a lot of people that are that driven you think that you think that possibly there are more men who are that driven than there are women does anybody think that that's a true (.) assumption

F5: it could be

F6: well it's different socialized that we've got like the man's job....

The striking thing in this sequence is how the students use questions to perform their role as facilitators. The advice given to teachers to keep the discussion going is to either not ask questions and do things like make statements and allow silences or to use a variety of questions including questions which expand directly upon the comments made by the student discussants. In this excerpt, the students seem to be doing something a little different with their questions. Teachers are advised to ask questions and word comments to insure that the students are the ones doing the discussing. However, these student facilitators seem to be using their questions to direct the course of the discussion and wording their comments to insure that the participants are responding to the questions which have been asked.

Each of the first two questions asked in this excerpt send the conversation in a different direction. FF3's question in line 7 seems to open up the floor for people to state their opinions. F1's response confirms this supposition when she, beginning in line 8, states what she thinks. FF2's question introduces the book (which was one of the assigned readings for the class period) as a resource on which to comment. And beginning in line 16 F2 does relate her comment to the book by agreeing with what was said in the article.

The facilitator's use of questions and comments becomes more apparent in the next two turns in this sequence. In this sequence a participant introduces a new issue into the conversation and a facilitator directs the conversation back to an issue previously introduced by a facilitator. In line 29, F3 introduces the "equal pay" issue. This theme has not been offered in either of the prior two questions FF3 or FF2's. FF3 following comment begins with the words "Take it back to the equality issue". The equality issue was raised in FF3's question in line 7. With this opening comment FF3 seems to be indicating that the discussion should not take up the "equal pay' issue but rather should move back to the "equality" issue.

The question posed by FF1 in lines 37-41 and then the question asked in lines 43-46 are different from the questions asked by FF3 and FF2 earlier in that these latter questions are only ambiguously open-ended. Both of these questions could be answered by a yes or no or by a raising of the hands. And in fact, the comments immediately following each of these questions are brief one line responses. In line 42, F4 simply states her take in one short comment, and in line 47 F5 answers in basically a yes/no fashion with "it could be".

This sequence shows a key difference in how these student-facilitators use their comments and questions and the way in which the prescriptions advise questions be used in a discussion. Rather than using questions and statements to insure that it is the students doing the discussing, these students seem to keep the conversation going by using the questions and comments to direct the flow of the discussion. The facilitators use their questions to introduce issues for discussion and use their comments to block the discussion from going in directions not introduced by the facilitators. Further, the questions asked are not always clearly open-ended, but are sometimes narrow in scope and this narrowness further directs the flow of the discussion.

Excerpt 3 focuses on the participants and shows through an analysis of their visible behavior how the participants typically perform the role of student and in doing so maintain the participation structure. This still shot is from the same sequence as excerpt 2. F3 is talking. The analysis focussed on the orientation of the participants. Orientation here refers to where the individuals are "pointing" with their gaze, hands and body posture (Kendon,1973) During this excerpt, the facilitators are seated at the head of the circle (off to these participants' right). F2 (the prior speaker is off to these participants' left.

Excerpt 3:

F2: =you're not as good as the guy whose sitting at the desk right now and that's the problem

F3: I think the big debate is (.) the equal pay issue I think that that's what a lot of women have a problem with is they're doing the same job as the men and getting paid less and I think that's a bigger issue than the the th qualification thing because any company is gonna want the most qualified person at the top =

There are two key aspects of orienting in this moment: toward whom the four participants are oriented and away from whom they are oriented. Participant B/F3 (the speaker) is oriented toward the facilitators. She is also gazing directly at them. She is not oriented to the participant who has just finished speaking. With her upper body, head, and eyes, participant D is oriented toward participant B (the current speaker). She is leaning in and pointing toward B. C is seated upright, her gaze is downward, her head turned slightly in the direction of B, and she seems to be oriented toward the center of the circle. Participant A also seems oriented toward the center of the circle: her gaze is slightly downward but more out and across, and her body position is slouched back and down into her chair. Her head is oriented slightly in toward the current speaker (B).

These orientings show the interactive construction of the distinction between facilitators and participants in this discussion. The current speaker B is talking to the facilitators. She is oriented toward them and them alone. She is not oriented toward any other participant, including the previous participant speaker. Participant A is leaning back to keep herself out of the line of connection between participant B and the facilitators. Being seated next to the current speaker (B), C would be visible to the facilitators as they are oriented to B. Being within view of the

facilitators, participant C is showing her participation in the discussion by slightly orienting (with her head turn) toward the speaker. Participant D is also showing her participation by clearly orienting to B. Further, by leaning forward, D moves herself closer to B and heightens the possibility that she will be visible to the facilitators as they are oriented to B.

Through these orientings the participants perform their roles as being actively engaged in the discussion. Whether that performance is speaking or being actively involved in the conversation as a listener, performing the role of participant means making oneself visible to the facilitators. In this moment, even A is making herself visible to the facilitators by acting to stay out of the way of their connection to the speaker (B). By her lack of orientation to the speaker, she shows that facilitating the connection between speaker and facilitator is a priority over attending directly to the participant speaker at hand. By orienting themselves in this way, these four participants are interactively constructing the role of participant as distinct from and in relation to the role of facilitator.

Excerpt 4 shows an instance where two participants break out of the participation structure. This excerpt comes from a discussion on capital punishment. The analysis of this segment pairs the vocals with the visible behaviors.

Excerpt 4:

F7: I think there always gonna be criminals you (.) and no matter how strict our death penalty is or (.) how soon we get people to the death penalty like .hh I don't think it's gonna help crime (.) I think a good point is that you know that just jail shouldn't be as (.) luxurious as it is right now you know maybe –it needs to be a little more strict- but like .hh as far as the

FF1: {mhhm}

F7: =death penalty I am definitely opposed to it and this is something that I've changed my mind in the last probably four years or so and I think that it just has to do with like especially this

FF1: {ummhmm}

F7: =movie I don't know if a lot of you have seen this where I mean everybody is a son or a daughter or you know a father or a sister or a brother I mean somebody body is something to everybody and who are we to take away from anyone you know granted if they do something so horrific they're gonna pay in my opinion one way or the other but and that has nothing to do with religion or god it has to do with (…) like life in general they're gonna pay and I=

FF1: {mhmm}

F6: I also, I believe that once a human like if we all have um fundamental rights like living here in this country I think that once someone kills another person takes their rights away then you've like forfeited your own. It's your choice. Um I think that's my biggest argument for the death penalty.

F7: So like what about like let's say that they were beaten as a young child and they're mentally screwed up because of something that happened to them, did they forfeit their rights to be the human they were gonna be? I mean

F6: Yeah but you can't [like it's so hard to

F7: [Who took that away from them

F6: Yeah I mean it's so hard to I mean it's got to stop somewhere

F7: Why does it have to stop at the person that's reacting or acting out of the way that they were taught if you want to talk about that type of circumstance

FF1: Well are you saying that rather than the death penalty being a deterrent to crime that like education and we need to do more to fix our social system? In a sense that we need to stop child abuse and things like that before=

F6: {we::ll yeah}

F7: like family values (…) (laugh)

FF1: =yeah family values before these kids even go into the real world? And become the criminals?, is that I mean do you guys feel that way do you think that rather than a (..) death penalty deterring crime like >if we headed off <a lot of these things before they even started (.) do you think we'd have um a lower crime rate?

M1: Absolutely no way about it (continues)

The interesting thing about this moment is the breach of the participation structure by F6 and F7, and the FF1's following comment and action. In lines 49-64, F7 has a normal orientation – picture G.

However, at line 70 she breaks from her orientation on the facilitators and orients to F6. At this point, F6 also orients to F7—picture K.

This co-orientation continues until FF1 speaks at line 76 at which time both F6 and F7 reorient to the facilitators.

FF1's comment at line 76 is interesting because it contains a formulation. A formulation is when someone restates what someone has previously said using different wording. (van Eemeren, Grootendorst, Jackson, & Jacobs, 1993) With "well are you saying that", FF1 restates F7's comments. This formulation is quite different than what the facilitator did in excerpt 2 where she ignored the issue raised by the participant and returned to the topic introduced by another facilitator. Here FF1 restates what was introduced by F7 and eventually turns in into a question in line 86. In essence then, FF1, rather than ignore the topic introduced by F7, brings that topic, after FF1 reframes it, to the whole group as an issue for discussion.

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At the same time she does this reframing and asking of a new question, FF1 takes an interesting visible action. At the outset, she is oriented to F7/F6–picture N. Then, she reorients her body so that she is more facing the center of the group—picture P. She then orients with body and face to the center of the group—picture T.

Combining the wording of her comments with the alteration of orientation shows how FF1 responds to F7 and F6's breach of the participation structure by working to bring them back into the group. With her words, she brings their idea to the whole group—rather than just between the two of them. With her body, she also moves to bring attention to the whole circle of participants. The facilitator responds to the breach by trying to get things back on track.

Excerpt 5 is an example of the facilitator's wrap-up of the discussion with their ending comments. This excerpt is from the discussion on capital punishment.

Excerpt 5

FF5: Okay um well we um have the results from the little surveys you guys took. There are twelve people who took it, and it looks like nine of you um advocate the death penalty and only three of you are against it. Um lets see five of you would rather have a life sentence in jail, three would rather die immediately, um one person said they wouldn't want either [laughs] and then two people said it depends on the crime. And everyone with the exception of one person felt that criminals should not be able to decide whether or not they get to choose between a life sentence and the death penalty. So it's kind of interesting um what we kind of expected that actually that people would much rather die immediately than have to live out a sentence in jail but it kind of looks like it came out the other way, so which is kind of interesting.

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99 F5: It probably depends on though what the jail is like.

100 FF5: Yeah, I mean if it's got cable TV and you can go work out and read and do
101 everything like that, you'd rather that.

102 [background voices]

103 FF5: Yeah, I don't think its, I mean I think living your life behind bars or you know

104 F5: You lose all your

105 FF5: Yeah you lose all your freedom. I think a lot, I don't know. A lot of people I know

106 [background voices and laughter]

107 FF5: So that's all that we have. Any questions?

In this excerpt, the discussion ends. In line 88, the facilitators offer a summary not of the discussion but of the exercise they had used to open the discussion. This summary does not end the discussion but rather leads into a back and forth discussion between FF5 and F5. The discussion finally ends at line 107.

This ending point is interesting because it is at this point that FF1 breaches the participation structure. At this point she asks for questions from the participants. Up to this point, the facilitators had asked questions and the participants had answered them. However, here the facilitator asks for questions from the participants at which point the discussion ends.

The interesting thing in this ending is that the prescribed ending--a summary--is not what ends the conversation. Rather what ends the conversation is when the facilitator breaches the participation structure. The facilitators ask no more questions. The participants have no more questions to answer, and so the discussion ends.

Conclusion

The close analysis of these five excerpts has shown that these student-facilitators are doing something different from what the prescriptive literature advises teachers to do when facilitating a classroom discussion. Three main differences are shown in these excerpts. In opening the discussion, these students made a clear statement as to what their role was in the discussion. In the middle phase of the discussion "keeping the conversation going", the facilitators and students performed their roles in order to maintain the participation. The participation structure consists of the facilitators directing the flow of the discussion with their questions and comments, and the participants orienting to the facilitators as they speak. If the participants break out of this participation structure, the facilitators use formulations and visible movements to direct the participants back to the participation structure. It is through both the facilitators and the participants maintaining the participation structure that the conversation continues. Finally, at the end of the discussion, the facilitators have a summary, but it is not a summary of what was said during the discussion, it is rather a summary of a pre-planned task which relates to the topic of the conversation. When this summary leads to a back and forth discussion between a facilitator and a participant, the facilitator ends the discussion with a telling statement. "That's all we have. Any questions?" Now at the end of the discussion, the facilitators are done directing and the participants can ask any questions, but they don't and the class ends.

It may not be very surprising that students don't follow the prescriptive advice from the literature. For many reasons, they are in a very different position than a teacher would be as a discussion facilitator. First is their only temporary status of class leader.

They are the leader for this day only, whereas the teacher is the established leader of the class. In fact this reason may be central in why the class discussion proceeds as it does. The student-facilitators open by clarifying their role (because it is not a role well-established in classroom tradition). During the discussion, the conversation seems to keep going because of the corresponding and coordinating role performances of facilitators and participants. Since the participants and facilitators are of relatively equal status (and on another day of student-led discussions they will indeed switch roles), it would seem in the interest of both parties to work with each other in continuing the discussion for the entire class period. So, with both roles enacting the same participation structure, the conversation continues until someone brings an end to it. The facilitators bring this end. They attempt to bring a close with a summary and then do bring a close with their own breach of the participation structure. The summary does not end the class as it would with a teacher-led discussion because the participants are not looking to "learn" from the facilitators as they would a teacher-facilitator. Rather, it is not until the student-facilitators breach the participation structure that the participants stop discussing.

The interesting thing about the differences found between what these student-facilitators do and what the prescriptive literature advises, is what do these differences found in actual practice have to say to the prescriptive literature? While there are many arguments which could be made about the lack of skill held by these student-facilitators or the lack of knowledge or even about the lack of motivation or simply different motivation, the argument made here is not about lack but about what actually occurred. These student facilitators and participants did have class-long discussions in which most if not all individuals did participate, and they all did so by performing their roles in such a

way that a single participation structure was enacted. Mehan (1979) made the argument that a large part of doing well in school is not only learning the material but learning how to enact the correct participation structure. After many years spent in school, by the time that students reach the upper college level, they likely have a high degree of ability to enact the correct structure. And so one piece of advice or possibly one warning which should be given to teachers attempting to lead a class discussion is about the power of participation structure.

Maintaining a participation structure is (as has been demonstrated by these students) one way in which conversations keep on going. In fact, it may be the way students are accustomed to performing the role of student. Knowing when to ask questions, knowing what kinds of answers to give, knowing when to listen and take in information are skills that likely have gotten students to this point in their education. To have a discussion is to set up a different kind of participation structure than a traditional lecture structure. Thinking about both the possibilities of truly having different structures and the potential of having merely a lecture structure in the guise of an interactive discussion are likely the thoughts at the center of the prescriptive literature on classroom discussions. However, as this paper has shown, when given the opportunity, students co-construct a participation structure very similar to a lecture structure (facilitators direct with questions and participants center on the facilitator and answer relevantly). In having a class discussion, the likelihood that students are so familiar with this participation structure has to be taken into account. Different structures both need to move away from this structure but also build on it. Moving to something too completely different, will

likely result in a very quiet classroom, but staying too close to it will result in a lecture cloaked in a discussion format.

What this study has to offer the prescriptive literature on classroom discussion is two-fold. One is simply that analyzing the discourse of discussions can tell us things that theoretically-driven conceptions and teacher reflections can not tell us. Second is that in order to have different kinds of learning taking place, the participation structures need to be different, and the ability to enact these different participation structures takes time and practice. One way then to further our understanding of how to have classroom discussions is to analyze the discourse of such discussions and find what these alternative structures are. Likely many of the prescriptions in the literature are part of constructing different participation structures, but to really get a grasp on what teachers are accomplishing when they use these prescribed techniques requires attention to the participation structures they along with their students are constructing in actual discussions.

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